

It could not be said that **Slightly Off Center: Eleven Extraordinarily Exhilarating Tales** (Swan Press, \$9.50) was the best or fullest possible introduction to the work of Neal Barrett Jr. Too much of the book is made up of semi-barbaric yawps about sex and death and drink and deliquescence, tales and sequences set in Texas and environs which evoke but do not match the stone thanatopsical glee of *The Hereafter Gang* (1991). “Buckstop” (new here) and “Deviations” (1988) are extremely funny, true enough, and instinct with mortality; but they do not reflect anything like the full technical range of Barrett’s work. “Tony Red Dog” (1989) – about an Indian in the Mafia – is on the other hand absolutely competent, though it sounds too much like Richard Condon’s *Prizzi* novels to stand quite alone.

“A Day at the Fair” (1981), which is set on the usual colony planet, is like James Tiptree Jr without the sexual anguish or the deathliness: a constantly evolving storyline featuring lots of characters and unpacking itself in sly whumps. “Uteropolis II” (new here) is like Barry Malzberg pretending to be as *cheerful* as Tiptree at the height of her tropic for death, and fooling us, for a bit. And “The Last Cardinal Bird in Tennessee” (first published here) is a superbly savage grand guignol playlet about the near future. What one remembers mainly is the exuberance, and the razor-sharp intimacy of the assumption of the voices of others, the sense of something large and raucous and imperfectly bound sitting somewhere within, like a bomb. *Slightly Off Center* is a sampler, and presents fragments and odd tales and other material unlikely to be found elsewhere (none of the author’s most famous short work appears here, and will presumably occupy any future collection from a trade press), and should be bought. The only problem is that Barrett is a burly man, and a bit of a shouter, and a writer of very loud author’s notes (in the true and terrible tradition of the sf presentation of self in everyday life), and almost elbows this smallish volume into tatters.

Harvey Jacobs’s new book, **Beautiful Soup: A Novel for the 21st Century** (Celadon Press, \$12.95), reads like timeslip. It is as though a wise person from an age long past had awoken in 1993, saw that certain awfulnesses from the years of his youth were still visible, to his sensitized eye, in the cauldrons of becoming, and sat down to chivvy the world for tolerating them still. What *Beautiful Soup* tells us is that – as was, once upon a time, discovered – it is dehumanizing to treat people as though they were identical with the labels – here called Bar Codes – used to describe them for

administrative purposes. (This is more or less what Hannah Arendt once defined as Eichmann’s Law.) What *Beautiful Soup* also tells us is that big business and politics stalk hand in hand; that computers – the main one in the novel is a singleton called the Prime Mother Computer, which is kept at a hidden location, and which determines the status of every individual from the moment of birth – should not be treated as gods; and that psychiatry tends to the sham.

It is a book, in other words, whose thematic contents no longer contribute to the flow of imaginative thought in the world of sf, except as warp and woof. Which is not to say that it is no longer a bad thing to dehumanize folk with Code Bars, or irrelevant to read the runes of power, or wrong to address the tendency of the modern world insufficiently to differentiate between computers and wombs, or foolish to mock hydraulic metaphors for the rancorous jostles of self within the skull. It is to say that modern sf writers no longer address these issues through novels in which Candide-like guys who thought they were safe suddenly lose their *status* and fall by comic-inferno stages through archaicized admissa torments into the depths but find love at the end. *Beautiful Soup*, in other words, is a geezer.

It is also marvellous. The simplicity of its imaginative message allows Jacobs – an extremely sophisticated writer, and the author of *The Egg of the Glak* (1969) – to tell his tale with a strange megaphonic austerity whose effect is both comic and resonant, urgently bald. He may have relatively little new to report, but nothing said can be forgotten. Some of the jokes are Vonnegutish; or reminiscent of Terry Southern. The New York discernible through the veils of timeslip has more to do with Philip Roth than Frederik Pohl, though both consort. But the central voice, like a megaphone, is fixating, dominant, ancient-mariner. In this voice, the antique plot buzzes with energy: the protagonist loses his A+ coding when he trips in a supermarket and is fortuitously recoded as a brand of Pea Soup; his father-in-law, a businessman about to run for President, shuffles him into a sanatorium, from which he descends to a penitentiary called Millhaus, and then to a circus. The language has perfect poise and an almost lubricious clarity; the story shouts, contorts, aims arrows, pirouettes and slams and does a dance. The protagonist is a vacancy, but with a great mouth.

Beautiful Soup cannot be faulted for a thing it tells us, though nothing it tells us is remotely innovative; what cannot be forgotten – what makes the book worth reading and rereading – is the whiplash presence of the telling. It is enough that from its narrow ledge of

utterance, from its different drum, a work of art does the world.

(John Clute)

Born to Run Wendy Bradley

Delighted as I am that there is actually a decent rock song involving someone called Wendy, I have always been suspicious of the sentiments involved. Not that, in certain moods, I don’t fancy myself on a motorbike chasing a runaway American dream and all that: I’m just not keen on someone who wants to “guard your dreams and visions.” Well, thanks, Bruce, but I rather think I’ll guard my own. There are too many stories where the male viewpoint “guards” the world’s dreams and visions (the male view treated as being normal, the female as abnormal, the story telling us what women ought to want) and not enough where women get to share a few unguarded visions of their own. Yes lads, you can stop reading right now because Fiona Cooper’s **The Empress of the Seven Oceans** (Black Swan, £5.99) isn’t aimed at you *at all*.

It is a roistering romp of a pirate tale but a purely female romp: in a 17th-century England – unsafe for any independent woman while the witchfinders are on the prowl – a pair of lesbian lovers, a stray nun, some kids, a circus acrobat, a couple of fearsome old battleaxes and a dancing bear steal a ship and follow a haughty mermaid to Atlantis. The world of the book is one where witchcraft works and is a force for good and where women really can live happily ever after. More engaging when the women are being independent in a credible way than in the wilder flights of hippiedom, nevertheless it’s a groovy old page turner.

Well, OK, you have to be in the mood, I’ll give you that.

A woman hero features too, as you would expect from the series title, in Book II of *The Taliswoman*, **Seed upon the Wind** by Carole Nelson Douglas (Tor, \$19.95). This is an interesting enough parallel-world story where the hero is a lady reporter who blunders back into the world of Veil and attempts to return the magical object, the Cup of Earth, she acquired in her previous visit. Along the way she teaches Rowan, the red-headed m.c.p. male lead, about taekwando, sexual equality and plain old sex. She also finds an etherion pit, etherion being a lighter-than-air metal used to build aircraft rather in the manner of cavorite, and develops a theory that pollution from our world is also polluting Veil and creating its population of “little-lost,” lost children frozen in size but

You really shouldn’t trust me. I thought of her hard shiny laughter that night at Talulah’s; her talk of bodyguards and guns; how she had found me, found my apartment, bypassed the locks, sat on my bed. But I also remembered the way she had leaned forward, so close; the way she moved, oh god the way she moved...

Finally, the level of darkness in the apartment got through to me: it wasn’t just the gathering storm, it was getting late. I scribbled a note for the Super about my burned out fuses, and left for work.

Talulah gave me some hard looks; I rang up the wrong money several times, and twice kept customers waiting while I stared off into space, thinking of Nadia with her ankle spike and metal fingernails, the way she curved and arched, her blood-red lips...

The women were restless tonight, and Jenny the DJ played strange, hard music with a driving slow beat. The air shimmered with tension and heat. We sold more shots of tequila and vodka that night than any other Wednesday since the fourth of July three years ago. I got bought a few, too, and drank them down eagerly, as though the clear liquid might give me some answers.

Nadia came in a little after midnight. I’d been waiting for her of course. She was wearing diaphanous dark-red pants and shirt through which showed her dancer’s shadowed curves. I could almost feel those strong muscles under my hands, and wondered whether if I ran my fingers down her silky calves I’d find a metal spike around her ankle. I turned away as she found a table near the dance floor, and served two women who had just come in. They ordered beer. When the taller one reached out to pay, I noticed her little finger was bent. They both wore jackets, even though it was hot. I swallowed, gave them change. They nodded and took stools at the bar. Where they could watch Nadia.

“Think I’ll go round up the empties, see if I can scare up some more orders,” I said casually to Talulah. She gave me another of those hard looks, but nodded.

I hit four tables before Nadia’s, trotted back and forth with more shot glasses of vodka and tequila. When I thought the bodyguards weren’t looking, I cruised up behind Nadia.

“A drink, ma’am?”

She looked up with those sleepy-lidded eyes, those dangerous, gorgeous eyes. She smiled, and I knew she knew I’d watched her dance. She could probably smell it on me. “A drink, yes.” Her eyes flickered to the jacketed women at the bar and back. I nodded that I’d noticed them. “Bring me a surprise,” she said, and turned away.

I took her a shot glass of Prairie Fire: tequila with seven drops of tabasco sauce. She swallowed it down without looking at me. “Bring me another.” I brought her another. She watched the women on the dance floor moving belly to back, and drank it down as fast as the first. “Now you can watch me dance.”

She stood up, still without looking at me, and walked onto the floor, moving through the heaving crowd with an easy reach-the-rhythm step that wasn’t either syncopated or bang on the beat like a march. Then she danced.

At first she seemed to be more or less standing still,

